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BLACK ROCK

By RALPH CONNOR

Idaho bought a new gun, but he wore it "in his clothes" and used it chiefly in the pastime of shooting out the lights or in picking off the heels from the boys' boots while a stag dance was in progress in Slavin's. But in Stonewall's presence Idaho was a most correct citizen. Stonewall he could understand and appreciate. He was 6 feet 3 and had an eye of unpleasant penetration. But this new feeling in the community for respectability he could neither understand nor endure. The league became the object of his indignant aversion and the league men of his contempt. He had many sympathizers, and frequent were the assaults upon the newly born sobriety of Billy Breen and others of the league, but George's watchful care and Mrs. Mavor's steady influence, together with the loyal co-operation of the league men, kept Billy safe so far. Nixon, too, was a marked man. It may be that he carried himself with unnecessary jauntness toward Slavin and Idaho, saluting the former with, "Awful dry weather, eh, Slavin?" and the latter with, "Hello, old sport! How's times?" causing them to swear deeply and, as it turned out, to do more than swear.

But, on the whole, the antileague men were in favor of a respectable ball, and most of the league men determined to show their appreciation of the concession of the committee to the principles of the league in the important matter of refreshments by attending in force. Nixon would not go. However jauntily he might talk, he could not trust himself, as he said, where whisky was flowing, for it got into his nose "like a fishhook into a salmon." He was from Nova Scotia. For like reason Vernon Winton, the young Oxford fellow, would not go. When they chaffed, his lips grew a little thinner and the color deepened in his handsome face, but he went on his way. George despised the "hale hypochrite" as a "daft play," and the spending of \$5 upon a ticket he considered a "sinful waste of a gold siller," and he warned Billy against "contenancin' any sic reedekins nonsense."

But no one expected Billy to go, although in the last two months he had done wonders for his personal appearance and for his position in the social scale as well. They all knew what a fight he was making and esteemed him accordingly. How well I remember the pleased pride in his face when he told me in the afternoon of the committee's urgent request that he should join the orchestra with his cello! It was not simply that his cello was his joy and pride, but he felt it to be a recognition of his return to respectability.

I have often wondered how things combine at times to a man's destruction. Had Mr. Craig not been away at the Landing that week, had George not been on the night shift, had Mrs. Mavor not been so occupied with the care of her sick child, it may be Billy might have been saved his fall.

The anticipation of the ball stirred Black Rock and the camps with a thrill of expectant delight. Nowadays when I find myself forced to leave my quiet smoke in my studio after dinner at the call of some social engagement which I have failed to elude I groan at my hard lot, and I wonder as I look back and remember the pleasurable anticipation with which I viewed the approaching ball. But I do not wonder now any more than I did then at the eager delight of the men who for seven days in the week swung their picks up in the dark breasts of the mines or who chopped and sawed among the solitary silences of the great forests. Any break in the long and weary monotony was welcome. What mattered the cost or consequence? To the rudest and least cultured of them the sameness of the life must have been hard to bear, but what it was to men who had seen life in its most cultured and attractive forms I fail to imagine. From the mine, black and foul, to the shack, bare, cheerless and sometimes hideously repulsive, life swung in heart grinding monotony till the longing for a "big drink" or some other "big break" became too great to bear.

It was well on toward evening when Sandy's four horse team, with a load of men from the woods, came swinging round the curves of the mountain road and down the street. A gay crowd they were with their bright, brown faces and hearty voices, and in ten minutes the whole street seemed alive with lumbermen—they had a faculty of spreading themselves so. After night fell the miners came down "done up slick," for this was a great occasion, and they must be up to it. The manager appeared in evening dress, but this was voted "too giddy" by the majority.

As Graeme and I passed up to the Black Rock hotel, in the large store-room of which the ball was to be held, we met old man Nelson, looking very grave. "Going, Nelson, aren't you?" I said. "Yes," he answered slowly. "I'll drop in, though I don't like the looks of things much." "What's the matter, Nelson?" asked Graeme cheerily. "There's no funeral on." "Perhaps not," replied Nelson, "but

I wish Mr. Craig were at home." And then he added, "There's Idaho and Slavin together, and you may bet the devil isn't far off."

But Graeme laughed at his suspicion, and we passed on. The orchestra was tuning up. There were two violins, a concertina and the cello. Billy Breen was lovingly fingering his instrument, now and then indulging himself in a little snatch of some air that came to him out of his happier past. He looked perfectly delighted, and as I paused to listen he gave me a proud glance out of his deep, little, blue eyes and went on playing softly to himself. Presently Shaw came along.

"That's good, Billy," he called out. "You've got the trick yet, I see." But Billy only nodded and went on playing.

"Where's Nixon?" I asked. "Gone to bed," said Shaw, "and I am glad of it. He finds that the safest place on pay day afternoon. The boys don't bother him there."

The dancing room was lined on two sides with beer barrels and whisky kegs. At one end the orchestra sat; at the other was a table with refreshments, where the soft drinks might be had. Those who wanted anything else might pass through a short passage into the bar just behind.

This was evidently a superior kind of ball, for the men kept on their coats and went through the various figures with faces of unnatural solemnity, but the strain upon their feelings was quite apparent, and it became a question how long it could be maintained. As the trips through the passageway became more frequent the dancing grew in vigor and hilarity until by the time supper was announced the stiffness had sufficiently vanished to give no further anxiety to the committee.

But the committee had other cause for concern, inasmuch as after supper certain of the miners appeared with their coats off and proceeded to "knock the knots out of the floor" in break-down dances of extraordinary energy. These, however, were beguiled into the barroom and "filled up" for safety, for the committee were determined that the respectability of the ball should be preserved to the end. Their reputation was at stake not in Black Rock only, but at the Landing as well, from which most of the ladies had come, and to be shamed in the presence of the Landing people could not be borne. Their difficulties seemed to be increasing, for at this point something seemed to go wrong with the orchestra. The cello appeared to be wandering aimlessly up and down the scale, occasionally picking up with the tune with animation and then dropping it. As Billy saw me approaching he drew himself up with great solemnity, gravely winked at me and said:

"Shipped a cog, Mister Connor! Mosh hum-fortunate! Beauful hum-fortunate! But ships a cog. Mosh hum-fortunate!"

And he wagged his little head sagely, playing all the while for dear life, now second and now lead.

Poor Billy! I pitied him, but I thought chiefly of the beautiful, eager face that leaned toward him the night the league was made and of the bright voice that said, "You'll sign with me, Billy?" and it seemed to me a cruel deed to make him lose his grip of life and hope, for this is what the pledge meant to him.

While I was trying to get Billy away to some safe place I heard a great shouting in the direction of the bar, followed by tramping and scuffling of feet in the passageway. Suddenly a man burst through, crying:

"Let me go! Stand back! I know what I'm about!"

It was Nixon, dressed in his best—black clothes, blue shirt, red tie, looking handsome enough, but half drunk and wildly excited. The "Highland Fling" competition was on at the moment, and Angus Campbell, Lachlan's brother, was representing the lumber camps in the contest. Nixon looked on approvingly for a few moments. Then, with a quick movement, he seized the little highlander, swung him in his powerful arms clean off the floor and deposited him gently upon a beer barrel. Then he stepped into the center of the room, bowed to the judges and began a sailor's hornpipe.

The committee were perplexed, but after deliberation they decided to humor the new competitor, especially as they knew that Nixon with whisky in him was unpleasant to cross. Lightly and gracefully he went through his steps, the men crowding in from the bar to admire, for Nixon was famed for his hornpipe. But when after the hornpipe he proceeded to execute a clog dance, garnished with acrobatic feats, the committee interfered. There were cries of "Put him out!" and "Let him alone! Go on, Nixon!" and Nixon hurried back into the crowd two of the committee who had laid remonstrating hands upon him, and standing in the open center, cried out scornfully:

"Put me out! Put me out! Certainly! Help yourselves! Don't mind me!" Then, grinding his teeth so that I heard them across the room, he added, with savage deliberation, "If any man lays a finger on me, I'll—I'll eat his liver cold."

He stood for a few moments glaring round upon the company and then strode toward the bar, followed by the crowd, wildly yelling. The ball was forthwith broken up. I looked around for Billy, but he was nowhere to be seen. Graeme touched my arm.

"There's going to be something of a time, so just keep your eyes skinned," he said.

"What are you going to do?" I asked. "Do? Keep myself beautifully out of trouble," he replied.

In a few moments the crowd came surging back, headed by Nixon, who was waving a whisky bottle over his head and yelling as one possessed.

"Hello!" exclaimed Graeme softly. "I begin to see. Look there!"

"What's up?" I asked.

"You see Idaho and Slavin and their pets," he replied. "They've got poor Nixon in tow. Idaho is rather nasty," he added, "but I think I'll take a hand in this game. I've seen some of Idaho's work before."

The scene was one quite strange to me and was wild beyond description. A hundred men filled the room. Bottles were passed from hand to hand, and men drank their fill. Behind the refreshment tables stood the hotel man and his barkeeper, with their coats off and sleeves rolled up to the shoulder, passing out bottles and drawing beer and whisky from two kegs hoisted up for that purpose. Nixon was in his glory. It was his night. Every man was to get drunk at his expense, he proclaimed, flinging down bills upon the table. Near him were some league men he was treating liberally, and never far away were Idaho and Slavin passing bottles, but evidently drinking little.

I followed Graeme, not feeling too comfortable, for this sort of thing was new to me, but admiring the cool assurance with which he made his way through the crowd that swayed and yelled and swore and laughed in a most disconcerting manner.

"Hello!" shouted Nixon as he caught sight of Graeme. "Here you are!" passing him a bottle. "You're a knocker, a double handed front door knocker. You polished off old whisky soak here, old demjohn," pointing to Slavin, "and I'll lay five to one we can lick any blankety blank thieves in the crowd." And he held up a roll of bills.

But Graeme proposed that he should give the hornpipe again, and the floor was cleared at once, for Nixon's hornpipe was very popular and tonight, of course, was in high favor. In the midst of his dance Nixon stopped short; his arms dropped to his sides; his face had a look of fear, of horror.

There, before him, in his riding cloak and boots, with his whip in his hand as he had come from his ride, stood Mr. Craig. His face was pallid, and his dark eyes were blazing with fierce light. As Nixon stopped, Craig stepped forward to him, and, sweeping his eyes round upon the circle, he said in tones intense with scorn:

"You cowards! You get a man where he's weak! Cowards! You'd damn his soul for his money!"

There was a dead silence, and Craig, lifting his hat, said solemnly:

"May God forgive you this night's work!"

Then, turning to Nixon and throwing his arm over his shoulder, he said in a voice broken and husky:

"Come on, Nixon! We'll go!"

Idaho made a motion as if to stop him, but Graeme stepped quickly forward and said sharply, "Make way there, can't you?" and the crowd fell back, and we four passed through, Nixon walking as in a dream, with Craig's arm about him. Down the street we went in silence and on to Craig's shack, where we found old man Nelson, with the fire blazing and strong coffee steaming on the stove. It was he that had told Craig, on his arrival from the Landing, of Nixon's fall.

There was nothing of reproach, but only gentlest pity, in tone and touch as Craig placed the half drunk, dazed man in his easy chair, took off his boots, brought him his own slippers and gave him coffee. Then, as his stupor began to overcome him, Craig put him in his own bed and came forth with a face written over with grief.

"Don't mind, old chap," said Graeme kindly.

But Craig looked at him without a word, and throwing himself into a chair, put his face in his hands. As we sat there in silence the door was suddenly pushed open, and in walked Abe Baker, with the words, "Where is Nixon?" and we told him where he was. We were still talking when again a tap came to the door, and Shaw came in looking much disturbed.

"Did you hear about Nixon?" he asked. We told him what we knew.

"But did you hear how they got him?" he asked excitedly.

As he told us the tale the men stood listening, with faces growing hard.

It appeared that after the making of the league the Black Rock hotel man had bet Idaho a hundred to fifty that Nixon could not be got to drink before Easter. All Idaho's schemes had failed, and now he had only three days in which to win his money, and the ball was his last chance. Here, again, he was balked, for Nixon, resisting all entreaties, barred his shack door and went to bed before nightfall, according to his invariable custom on pay days. At midnight some of Idaho's men came battering at the door for admission, which Nixon reluctantly granted. For half an hour they used every art of persuasion to induce him to go down to the ball, the glorious success of which was glowingly depicted, but Nixon remained immovable, and they took their departure, baffled and cursing. In two hours they returned drunk enough to be dangerous, kicked at the door in vain, finally gained entrance through the window, hauled Nixon out of bed and, holding a glass of whisky to his lips, bid him drink, but he knocked the glass away, spilling the liquor over himself and the bed.

It was drink or fight, and Nixon was

ready to fight, but after a parley they had a drink all round and fell to persuasion again. The night was cold, and poor Nixon sat shivering on the edge of his bed. If he would take one drink, they would leave him alone. He need not show himself so stiff. The whisky fumes filled his nostrils. If one drink would get them off, surely that was better than fighting and killing some one or getting killed. He hesitated, yielded, drank his glass. They sat about him amiably drinking and lauding him as a fine fellow after all. One more glass before they left; then Nixon rose, dressed himself, drank all that was left of the bottle, put his money in his pocket and came down to the dance wild with his old time madness, reckless of faith and pledge, forgetful of home, wife, babies, his whole being absorbed in one great passion—to drink and drink and drink till he could drink no more.

Before Shaw had finished his tale Craig's eyes were streaming with tears, and groans of rage and pity broke alternately from him.

Abe remained speechless for a time, not trusting himself, but as he heard Craig groan, "Oh, the beasts, the fiends!" he seemed encouraged to let himself loose, and he began swearing with the coolest and most bloodcurdling deliberation.

Craig listened with evident approval, apparently finding complete satisfaction in Abe's performance, when suddenly he seemed to waken up, caught Abe by the arm and said in a horror stricken voice:

"Stop! Stop! God forgive us! We must not swear like this."

Abe stopped at once and in a surprised and slightly grieved voice said:

"Why, what's the matter with that? Ain't that what you wanted?"

"Yes, yes. God forgive me! I am afraid it was," he answered hurriedly, "but I must not."

"Oh, don't you worry!" went on Abe cheerfully. "I'll look after that part. And anyway ain't they the blankest blankety blank"—going off again into a roll of curses till Craig, in an agony of entreaty, succeeded in arresting the flow of profanity possible to no one but a mountain stage driver. Abe paused, looking hurt, and asked if they did not deserve everything he was calling down upon them.

"Yes, yes," urged Craig, "but that is not our business."

"Well, so I reckoned," replied Abe, recognizing the limitations of the cloth. "You ain't used to it, and you can't be expected to do it, but it just makes me feel good—let out of school like—to properly do 'em up, the blank, blank!" And off he went again. It was only under the pressure of Mr. Craig's prayers and commands that he finally agreed to "hold in, though it's tough."

"What's to be done?" asked Shaw. "Nothing," answered Craig bitterly.

He was exhausted with his long ride from the Landing and broken with bitter disappointment over the ruin of all that he had labored so long to accomplish.

"Nonsense!" said Graeme. "There's a good deal to do."

It was agreed that Craig should remain with Nixon, while the others of us should gather up what fragments we could find of the broken league. We had just opened the door when we met a man striding up at a great pace. It was George Crawford.

"Hae ye seen the lad?" was his salutation.

No one replied, so I told George of my last sight of Billy in the orchestra.

"An' did ye no' gang after him?" he asked in indignant surprise, adding, with some contempt, "Mon, but ye're a feckless boddie!"

"Billy gone, too?" said Shaw. "They might have let Billy alone."

Poor Craig stood in dumb agony. Billy's fall seemed more than he could bear. We went out, leaving him heartbroken amid the ruins of his league.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LEAGUE'S REVENGE.

AS we stood outside of Craig's shack in the dim starlight we could not hide from ourselves that we were beaten. It was not so much grief as a blind fury that filled my heart, and, looking at the faces of the men about me, I read the same feeling there. But what could we do? The yells of carousing miners down at Slavin's told us that nothing could be done with them that night. To be so utterly beaten and unfairly and with no chance of revenge was maddening.

"I'd like to get back at 'em," said Abe, carefully repressing himself.

"I've got it, men," said Graeme suddenly. "This town does not require all the whisky there is in it." And he unfolded his plan. It was to gain possession of Slavin's saloon and the bar of the Black Rock hotel and clear out all the liquor to be found in both these places. I did not much like the idea, but George said: "I'm ga'en after the lad. I'll hae naethin' tae dae wi' yon. It's no that easy, an' it's a sinfu' waste."

But Abe was wild to try it, and Shaw was quite willing, while old Nelson sternly approved.

"Nelson, you and Shaw get a couple of our men and attend to the saloon. Slavin and the whole gang are up at the Black Rock, so you won't have much trouble, but come to us as soon as you can."

And so we went our ways.

Then followed a scene the like of which I can never hope to see again, and it was worth a man's seeing, but there were times that night when I wished I had not agreed to follow Graeme in his plot.

As we went up to the hotel I asked Graeme:

"What about the law of this?"

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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